

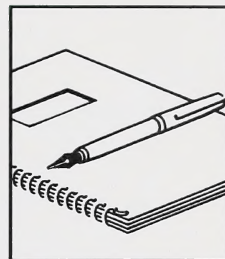
# Heritage Notes

Planning for Heritage Resources

Research and Documentation

## How to Do Oral History

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Number 11



In a relaxed, informal setting, an interview can take place comfortably.  
Photo: Robert van Schaik

### Introduction

Oral history is not new; historians have always interviewed people. What is new is the technology used to preserve these conversations. Compact and easy to use cassette tape recorders have made oral history a popular research method among local history societies and many other groups for a wide range of history projects.

Be cautioned, however, that oral history projects are no different than any other research project, and must have a clear purpose, methodology, and organization. A good deal of careful preparation is required to carry out a successful interview. It will require a major commitment on the part of a volunteer group to see the process through. Oral history projects are challenging and hard work, but they can be fun and the results well worth the effort.



**Alberta**  
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Each oral history project will be different because of the nature and scope of the project, the funds and time available, as well as the expertise of the people involved. Generally, there are four main phases to an oral history project.

1. Set up.
2. Research and preparation.
3. Interviewing.
4. Follow up work.

This *Heritage Note* will lead you through the various phases of an oral history project. It identifies some of the questions you should ask yourselves, and provides concrete recommendations and examples to assist you. Following the steps outlined in this *Heritage Note* will help to ensure that your oral history project is worthwhile. The final section offers a bibliography, "Keys to Further Information."

You may also want to have a professional historian with experience in oral history projects talk to your group. Local colleges, archives, museums, heritage agencies or historical societies can put you in contact with someone who can help you with your particular project.

### **What Oral History Is and What It Is Not**

Oral history records personal reminiscences that are of historical significance, focusing on impressions, attitudes, feelings, and description, rather than facts. Oral history allows us to gather information about everyday things, daily routines of work and living that are usually not recorded, and the experiences and perspectives of those whose opinions are not often found in written documents.

Oral history is used by family and local historians and by genealogists. It has been used extensively in labour history, the history of minority groups, immigrant history, and in the history of industries and occupations. Oral history is essential for aboriginal history, and although there may be cultural differences in the interviewing process and the way the project is carried out, many of the same

organizational and technical considerations are relevant.

The term "oral history" is in many ways a misnomer. The interview itself is in fact not history. The interviewer is creating a historical document, which can then be used as a source of information in the writing and presentation of history. The interview is usually only the first of several steps in collecting information for a larger historical project. Oral history is a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

Oral history is not the collecting of trivial anecdotes. Rather it should follow a definite direction and line of enquiry that is determined by the goals of any particular project. Interviews are not a reliable way to collect factual information, as memory is very often faulty. There is, for example, no point in asking in what year the local mine opened or what year a particular accident happened, as you can easily find the answer in the written record. There is value, however, in asking about the daily operation of the mine, the people who worked in it, rescue facilities, and working conditions. Oral history interviews tend to "telescope" time, and often the recollections of a lifetime are a record of shifting perceptions.

Oral history interviews supplement rather than replace other sources such as newspapers, photographs, diaries, and business, institutional or municipal records. Oral history interviews can illustrate developments and events with personal reminiscences, and can also fill the gaps or compliment the written record through description and reflection.

Finally, avoid romanticizing the past and remember that oral history interviews are not "testimony to the good old days."

### **Some Questions to Ask Yourself at the Very Beginning**

#### **1. What is the purpose of our project?**

It is a good idea to clarify on paper what the aim or purpose of your project is, and set goals that you can meet. The best beginning is a modest one.

If you are going to seek funding to carry out the project, you will have to explain very clearly what it is you hope to achieve. Do not try to be too ambitious. A well defined, carefully planned and tightly focused project is more likely to impress a funding agency than a vague open-ended undertaking.

## **2. *What is the end product going to be?***

What are you going to do with the interviews? Perhaps you could publish your interviews in their entirety in book form. If so, you will have to think about setting aside time and money to allow for verbatim transcripts of the interviews.

Could your interviews be published as a sound document, that is, used on the radio or for documentaries? If you wish to use portions of the interviews for an audio documentary, for example, on an event or an industry, you must use equipment that can produce broadcast quality sound.

Could they be used in developing exhibits in a museum or elsewhere? Do they have potential for an educational kit?

There are many possibilities depending on the nature of your project. Sometimes it is difficult to see what the end product could be until you have the material in the form of completed interviews. But at least consider the end product, as it may have an important bearing on your planning process.

## **3. *Are oral history interviews the best way to get the information we need?***

The only way to figure this out is to do some preliminary research on the subject. Remember you are seeking first hand accounts, not hearsay. You need to examine all potential sources of information on what you want to research. What sources are available for researching settlement patterns? family histories? a church history? cultural traditions? Oral history may provide some of the answers, but rarely everything you need to know for your project.

A major consideration is the time period you are researching. If you are working on the early history of a rural community, oral history may not provide the best source, as no one may still be alive with first hand information about the community. In general, oral history works best when the person being interviewed talks about events they experienced as a teenager or older. Few people can now be interviewed for the period before the First World War; most projects will be most effective for the period after the late 1920s. Those people who can clearly recall events 60 to 65 years ago will be in their late seventies and eighties. Many oral history projects are undertaken twenty years after the people who would have been most valuable to interview have passed on.

## **4. *How long do we have to do this project?***

How soon do you need the information? Do you have a set date by which you must be completed?

Most projects will best be carried out within a defined period of time. You may want to undertake a couple of interviews as a pilot phase to work out how long it will take to complete the interview process and follow up work for your project. An approximate completion date sets a goal to work towards. This will help to prevent procrastination and burn out.

On the other hand, you may have reason to set up the project to continue over a number of years, as time, funds and interest dictate. If this is the case you need to take special care to establish written guidelines on how the project is to be run. This will ensure some continuity of process and quality, regardless of changing personnel in your society or institution. This is very important in a volunteer organization.

## **5. *Who should be responsible for what?***

It is essential to establish who in your group is going to do what, right from the start. Planning an oral history project includes developing a strategy to carry it out.

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You need to establish how many people will be involved. Who is going to select the people to interview? Who is going to do the background research for the project? Who is going to do the interviewing? The answers to these questions will depend on your particular circumstances. Try to allocate tasks to the people best skilled and temperamentally suited to them. Outgoing personalities are often best suited for administration, fund raising, and publicity, whereas the person who is a good listener and enjoys relating on a one-to-one basis will make the best interviewer.

You will need to think about an administrative plan, a set of procedures to be followed for your project. How, for example, will the use of equipment be coordinated and regulated? It is advisable to have one person coordinate all members and activities. If your society or association has paid staff for this job, so much the better. It is challenging and hard work, and a volunteer coordinator will need to be particularly keen, well organized and energetic.

**6. *Do we have adequate funds for this project?***

Can you afford to buy the necessary and appropriate equipment? It is a good idea to price out whatever equipment you will need to purchase before making any commitments to the project, and especially before you approach a funding agency. It is a common error to suppose that any tape recorder will do the job –it won't! (See section on equipment below.)

You will need to calculate operating costs such as long distance telephone calls, stationery supplies, stamps, files and tapes. Research expenses may include trips to out of town archives as well as photocopying.

**7. *What is the difference between a transcript and a summary or synopsis of the interviews?***

A transcript is a verbatim written version of the entire interview. A summary or synopsis is a brief descriptive list that charts the progression of the interview, designed as a guide to the contents and topics that were discussed.

The decision to do one or the other should be determined by the nature and purpose of the project, time available, and costs that will be incurred.

**8. *Who can have access to our interviews?***

You need to plan for future access to the interview tapes. This includes the preparation of a waiver or release form to allow the tapes to be used by researchers. A release form is in effect a contract between the interviewer and interviewee. They can vary in content but should be worded so as to cover the widest possible use of the tape. The release form must include the signature of the interviewee or interviewee as well as the interviewer, the date and place of interview. The legal status of release forms is, as yet, uncontested in Canada, but they have been the subject of court cases in the U.S. It may be advisable to have a lawyer look at your release form.

It is essential to acquire copyright to the material to allow for its publication, either as a written or sound document. The Canadian Copyright Act, however, is not clear as to the ownership rights of recorded material. Revisions to the Act may clarify this.

You or your organization may not be the only people interested in the information on these tapes. Avoid judging what is useful or not in your interviews, once you have the information you wanted. If you have decided to preserve them, do so in their entirety. It is difficult to predict what may be of significance or interest to a researcher in 2024.

If your tapes are to be stored as a permanent record it is a good idea to establish a cataloguing system and procedures to facilitate use by other researchers.

Make it known that your collection exists. Inform associations, societies, museums or groups that have the same interests as yours throughout the province or across the prairies, and even beyond. Inform the Canadian Oral History Association, which has compiled the *National Inventory of Oral History Holdings*, of your project. It would be useful to obtain a

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copy of this inventory to see who may share your area of interest (see “Keys to Further Information” below).

### **9. *Where are we going to keep the tapes?***

You need to establish a secure place to store the tapes, in appropriate conditions to ensure their preservation.

If your institution does not have an archive, you might consider turning the interviews and documentation over to a local archive or museum. In Alberta a list of archives and museums is available from the Alberta Archives Council, c/o City of Calgary Archives, and these institutions may be willing to assist you.

## **The Ethics Of Oral History**

Oral history is a cooperative venture between the interviewer and interviewee. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to establish good rapport with the person being interviewed, give the interview structure, and control its pace. At the same time, the interviewee must be made to feel he/she has a stake in the interview too, and that what he/she has to say is listened to with attention and respect.

An oral history interview can be a special occasion for many elderly people; perhaps the first time in years that anyone has sought out their views. It can be a rewarding and therapeutic experience to assess a lifetime but it can also be painful at times. The interviewer should be sensitive to the feelings of the interviewee throughout the interview, and turn off the recorder if asked to do so.

Always respect the wishes of the interviewee, and do not press him/her to talk about something that he/she does not wish to discuss. If someone becomes visibly upset during an interview it is best to stop recording until he/she is ready to go on.

The interview should be carried out in a spirit of candour, objectivity and integrity. Make sure the interviewee understands the purpose of

the interview, that the interview will be taped and that he/she will be asked to sign the release form. The interviewer should explain where the tapes will be kept and the purposes for which they may be used.

Restrictions imposed on the use of the interview tape by an interviewee should be strictly adhered to in all circumstances.

Be as professional as possible in the interview. Proficiency in the technical skills of operating the equipment is essential to an effective interview. Aim to operate your equipment without constantly watching or fussing with it. Appropriate social etiquette in dress and manners should always be observed.

Interviewers should remember that they represent their society or institution and the community that supports it. If you have letterhead use it for all correspondence. In a larger community, where there may be fears about safety for the elderly, it is a good idea to carry a card from your society or association to identify yourself.

A final ethical question lies in the area of potential libel. Never encourage contentious statements about people's character or actions that an interviewee may later regret making.

## **Setting Up the Project**

### ***What kind of equipment do we need?***

Audio and audio-visual technology has developed rapidly in the last couple of years. Many of the recommendations you will read on specific equipment are out of date, with respect to availability and/or price. What you can get may well be determined by where you live as well as your budget. The best thing to do, if at all possible, is to discuss your requirements with a company in a major city that deals in a broad range of sound equipment, rather than a store that sells only one brand of equipment.

The following is a guide to the types of equipment you may want to consider, and the questions you should ask about the equipment before you buy. Always test the equipment in

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the store. Is it easy to operate? How close do you need to be to the microphone to get good sound?

### ***Recorder***

It is most important to select equipment that produces quality sound. Without this your interview has limited value as a sound document. Oral history interviews have traditionally been done on reel-to-reel tape recorders, as they produce the best sound. Cassette recorders are easier to use, but the choice of recorder, and most importantly, the microphone, will determine the quality of sound you will obtain.

Mini audio disk recorders are now available, as well as digital compact cassettes. Both produce very good sound quality tapes, with no tape hiss. Digital compact cassette recorders can also play back standard (also known as analog) cassette tapes.

Another important consideration is the long term preservation of the tapes. Interviews recorded on a cassette tape can later be re-recorded on a reel-to-reel system for the most reliable permanent preservation. The preservation of the sound quality on cassette tapes will depend on the type of tape used as well as proper storage conditions (see section on care, storage and handling of tapes below). The long term life span of video tapes, video disks or audio mini disks is unknown. The digital compact cassette is probably the best preservation option, as the sound can be copied without losing quality. Your local archivist may be able to advise you on preserving these types of recordings.

Until recently, the most important consideration has been to get a recorder which would take an external microphone. Tapes made on earlier recorders with built-in microphones were usually of inferior sound quality. Often, there would be a constant hissing noise and the voices were somewhat muffled. However, newer machines with built-in microphones are much improved and can record good sound, if they are properly positioned.

You will need a recorder that will work on AC (alternating current) household power as well as DC (direct current), that is, batteries. Oral history practitioners debate the value of using batteries over household power. Batteries have an advantage in that the recorder can be placed wherever is best and most convenient, with a minimum of fuss. Batteries, however, wear down quickly, and are expensive. Many people also consider them an environmental hazard. It is necessary to devise some method of keeping track of how many hours use they have had to gauge when they need to be replaced. This can be risky, particularly if a number of different people will be using the equipment. In any event, batteries should be used for recording only, not for playing back the interview. Always take an extra set along to every interview.

There is very little reason not to use AC in Alberta. However, in some rural areas, especially during thundery summer days, it may be advisable to take batteries for your recorder if there is any threat of power surges or failures. You can also buy a device to protect your recorder from power surges.

Most recorders will have manual level control (MLC) or automatic level control (ALC) and some have both. ALC tends to pick up unwanted or ambient noise as it strives to pick up all sounds. MLC, however, requires careful adjustment, and is difficult to gauge on some machines without a UV meter. This is an instrument which measures the volume of what is being recorded.

A PAUSE button is a useful feature as it allows you to stop briefly without using the STOP button, which will give you a crashing sound on the tape.

If your recorder has an "end of tape side" alarm, such as a blinking light, so much the better.

In conclusion, a portable cassette recorder of adequate quality will probably fit the budget of most oral history projects. A lightweight, easy to use recorder in the middle price range will

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give you reasonable sound, although not as good as a broadcast quality machine, which can cost over \$1,000.

Whatever machine you buy, be sure to practice using it before your first interview to familiarize yourself with its workings and capabilities.

### ***Microphone***

There are several kinds to consider, depending on your needs and funds.

1. Lavalier microphones produce the clearest sound. They can be clipped on to the participant's clothing. They are also the most expensive option.
2. A desk or stand type directional microphone is an alternative. The major consideration here is the pick up pattern. Omnidirectional mikes pick up sound equally from all around, cardioid pick up more from in front and less from the rear, bidirectional pick up from front and rear but less from the sides. Your choice of mike will determine how you place yourself in an interview, and how loudly the interviewer must speak.

It is worth asking your supplier about a foam pad or other type of component to muffle noise such as a pencil drumming on the table. This will sound like thunder without some device to cushion its pick up by the microphone.

When you purchase your equipment, photocopy the operational manuals to use if the originals are lost.

### ***Tapes***

Good quality C-60 low noise cassette tapes designed for professional use are the best choice for oral history interviewing. Each side is 30 minutes long.

Because the tape used on C-90 and C-120 cassettes is thinner, it has a greater potential for breaking or twisting and also for "print through." This means that the sound of one side of the tape "prints through" to the other,

leaving an echo effect on the tape.

It is not worth saving a few pennies on inferior tapes if the result is poor sound quality or a ruined interview. Do not be tempted to re-use tapes, or record more than one person on one tape—use a fresh tape for every interview.

Most tapes have a clear or white "leader" at the beginning, which doesn't pick up sound. If you use this type, you can inadvertently cut off the first part of an introduction to the interview. For this reason, tapes without any lead time are recommended, as the interview will begin to be recorded as soon as the record button is pressed. If you ever find that you have been supplied with leader tape, be sure to cue the machine to start recording with the leader already wound onto the take up reel.

Make sure the cassettes are screwed, rather than glued, together, which allows for "damage control" if a tape gets stretched or tangled.

### ***Extension cord***

You will need an extension cord to enable you to place the recorder wherever you want. Make sure it has a two pronged plug, as many older houses have the older style of electrical outlets with only two holes. You can also purchase an adapter for the two styles of outlets.

### ***Protective case***

Your equipment will get a lot of wear, so it is advisable to store and transport the recorder and mike in a protective case. It is also a compact way to carry the various bits and pieces. When you buy your sound equipment, ask the dealer to recommend someone to build "custom-made" cases.

### ***Headphones***

If your recorder has a plug in for them, headphones are a useful and inexpensive accessory. They allow for quiet listening to the tapes in a busy office. Often the use of headphones concentrates one's listening. There are two sizes of jack for headphones, but you can get adapters from one size to the other.

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## ***Video***

Oral history interviews can also be recorded on video tape. A video recording has the advantage of creating a visual record of the interview as well as documenting what was said. It will capture facial expressions, giving another dimension to the interview. On the other hand, a video taped oral history interview can be very distracting to listen to, and boring to watch unless it is skilfully shot. Something of the rapport and intimacy of an audio interview will be lost in the presence of a third person operating the camera. It can also upset the interviewee. An interviewee can forget that the tape recorder is on, but a camera is more difficult to ignore. It is also considerably more expensive, and state of the art video equipment is more difficult to obtain than a cassette recorder. If you do decide that a video recording is valuable for your project, it may be worth considering running an audio cassette tape recorder at the same time.

### ***How do we find the right people to interview?***

There are many different ways to do this, depending on the nature and scope of the project. If you are working on the history of an industry such as coal mining or logging in your area, it may be possible to get the names of potential interviewees through their unions or associations. A questionnaire that asks people to indicate their involvement with an industry, association or community may be a useful way to begin the process. You can write an article on your project in the local newspaper, or put up a notice on the town bulletin board. Contact with churches and seniors' homes may be another way to find potential interviewees. Tell friends and neighbours about your project, as the more people who know about it the better.

The best source is often those people you first interview. Interviewees often mention the name of someone who "knows a lot about that" or "knew Mr. X well." People will often say things such as "I never did that job myself, but my pal Joe did, he still lives over at Y," or "Well, there was a woman who...." Interviewers should follow these leads and

collect names and phone numbers at the end of the interview.

After a while, as the project becomes known, unsolicited names will come your way. When you collect names of potential interviewees, note who referred you to them. This can be a useful form of introduction, although sometimes it can backfire on you.

When you do get a name, make a note of why the person might be a good interviewee, and in what specific ways their life may be significant to your project. Also, if the person is very elderly, it is a good idea to inquire whether the person uses the telephone. Deafness and/or dislike of the telephone may be a consideration in assessing how you wish to approach someone you want to interview. Finally, always approach the person directly about being interviewed. Avoid making arrangements through a son, daughter or spouse, who may have an agenda of their own.

Once you have the name of a potential interviewee, it can sometimes be very difficult to locate the person. This is particularly the case in large urban centres. Always try to get a telephone number and/or address when you get names of potential interviewees. Seniors may have retired to another part of the country, which may be too far away from your area to make an interview possible. They may also have moved into senior citizens' homes or extended care facilities. Women can be particularly hard to track for the simple reason that family telephone numbers are frequently listed under a man's name.

### ***How do we select people to interview?***

Not everybody on your list will make a good oral history interviewee. You will need to assess several things about them before making your decision.

#### ***1. Do they have the kind of information you are looking for?***

You will need to contact the person to find this out. There are several ways to do this. First you have to decide whether you are going to let

them know immediately that you are interested in oral history interviews. Sometimes you can work your way towards that by explaining that you are doing some research and wonder if he/she can help you. Then you can judge whether or not to ask him/her about doing an interview. Alternatively, you may wish to send out a letter explaining the project, and stating that you understand he/she may be able to help you. Then, when you telephone as promised in the letter, the person will be expecting your call.

You may prefer to arrange to pay a preliminary call in person "to chat about your research" either before or after you may have made a decision to interview the person. A preliminary visit has the benefit of establishing a rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Be careful, however, that this visit does not turn into an interview. It is very easy to fall into this trap, and you will sometimes have to be very firm in saying you want to hear about that when you have the tape recorder, and excusing yourself. Try not to stay for more than half an hour.

Very often a potential interviewee will tell you they have little to offer, that he only worked in the mine a short time, that the foreman could tell you more, or that she just did the usual things on the farm. If you think the person has something to offer tell them so and explain why their experience is valuable to your project and significant for posterity.

At this stage it is often a good idea to gather some biographical details about the person. This is crucial if the person making initial contact with the interviewees is not going to do the interviews. This information can then be passed on to the interviewer as a first stage in the research process before the interview. It can be useful to record and organize this information on a biographical information form. Design your form to cover the aspects of a person's life that are relevant to your project. This form can later be filed as part of the documentation of the interview.



## **2. *Are they willing to share it with you?***

The best interviewees are those who are at ease with themselves and love to talk and tell a good story. Sometimes people may not wish to take part in your project for reasons of their own. Do not press the point, as an unwilling interviewee will not talk freely.

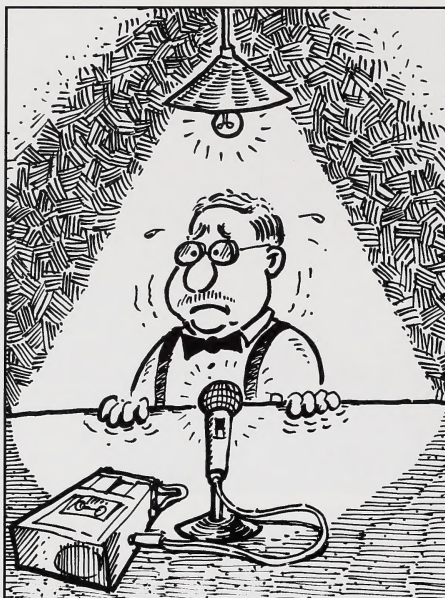
For some people the idea of the tape recorder can be intimidating. Talk to them for a while to ascertain whether information they have is vital to your project or not. If so, reassurance and an emphasis on the significance of their contribution to the project may get you past this hurdle. If not, let them know that if they ever change their mind you hope that they will call you. You may want to call back after a period of time to double check.

## **3. *Are they able to share it with you?***

A potential interviewee may have wonderful information and be more than willing to talk to you, but may be unable to do so. An interview may prove to be very fatiguing, and an already frail voice may become barely audible. An interviewee's deafness may cause him or her to misunderstand questions, or require the interviewer to repeat questions frequently. Beyond a certain point deafness may make an effective interview impossible, and result only in frustration for both participants.

**Contact with churches and community organizations may be one way to find potential interviewees.  
Photo: David Epp**

Make sure your interviewee is comfortable during the interview and ask questions in a conversational tone!  
Graphic based on sketch by Gordon Menzies.



Once you have selected a number of people to interview for your project, you then need to think about the order in which you will carry out the interviews. Who should you interview first? The basic guideline is age and health in relation to the expected value of the interview. Most practitioners advise that it is best to get on with the interviewing process as soon as possible.

The uncomfortable truth about oral history projects is that potential interviewees may die before you get to talk to them.

*What skills should a good interviewer have?*

The most important skill is the ability to listen with sincerity, empathy and sensitivity. People who prefer to listen will generally make better interviewers than those who like to talk.

### Anyplace Oral History Project BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Present address: \_\_\_\_\_ Place of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Father's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Mother's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Other family information: \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

When/where did you first live, work or frequent in the Anyplace area? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Schooling: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation(s) - what, where, and when: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Organizations/societies: \_\_\_\_\_

Activities and interests: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Church: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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The ability to communicate easily and comfortably is necessary to establish rapport with an interviewee. A clear speaking voice is essential. An interviewer should be non-threatening, but firm enough to prevent an interview from becoming a ramble.

The interviewer should be very familiar with the use of the recording equipment.

The question of job assignments in your group is a thorny one. It may be that one person will contact and evaluate potential interviewees, and others will do the interviews. This does not lend itself to continuity for the interviewee. If your group has assigned tasks in this way, it may be a good idea to have the interviewer also telephone for a preliminary discussion.

### **Research and Preparation for Interviews**

It is essential to know as much as possible about the subject matter of your project. If your project is about the history of an industry, for example, you need to know as much as possible about its development, the terminology used to describe tools or processes involved, the roles and responsibilities of employees. Research topics such as particular events, strikes or accidents, or well known people associated with a company. You may need to research the industry in a provincial or regional context. Ideally, this kind of research should be carried out before you decide to go ahead with an oral history project. Once you have a broad understanding of your subject you will have an idea of what information is available in other sources and what gaps exist in the record. Good research will allow you to ask informed questions from a historical perspective, and the person being interviewed will warm to the interview more quickly. Be careful, however, that you do not intimidate your interviewee with your seemingly superior knowledge.

It is very useful to compile lists of the type of questions that your project seeks to answer. These are usually referred to as "question sets." A question set is not a standard questionnaire

as such, but rather questions from which you can pick and choose while doing your interview. There are two types of question sets. The first is a general or main list of questions that pertain to the project as a whole. These can be amended or added to after an initial pilot phase, or as the project progresses and more topics emerge for investigation. The second is the specific set of questions for a particular interview. These questions may come from the main list or may be specifically tailored to the knowledge and experience of the person being interviewed. You do not have to stick to these during the interview or cover all of them, but they do serve as a guide.

In addition to researching the subject area of your project and topics of your interview, it is a good idea to find out as much as possible about the life of the person you are going to interview. You can begin with the biographical details that he/she has initially provided, and move on to finding out more about events, people or associations that he/she was involved with.

Research sources will depend on the nature of your project. You may need to go beyond your local library to visit regional archives. Community histories, newspapers, photograph collections, municipal records, and numerous other sources should be considered.

The importance of doing adequate research to prepare for your interviews cannot be stressed enough. The more you know about your subject, and the more you know about the person you are going to interview, the better the job you will do.

As pointed out in *Voices: A Guide to Oral History*, (see "Keys to Further Information") there are three basic types of interview: topical, process and chronological. The nature of your project will determine which approach is most appropriate, and guide your choice of questions.

*Topical*, e.g. "The Depression."

Discussion on the Depression will be the main, although not necessarily exclusive, focus of the

Here are some examples of closed versus open-ended questions.

**Closed:**

- a. Was religion important to your family?
- b. Were you a soldier during the Second World War?

**Open-ended:**

- a. Tell me about religious observances in your family.
- b. What did you do during the Second World War?

Here are some examples of leading versus neutral questions.

**Leading:**

- a. You must have been pleased on election night?
- b. You disapproved of dancing after midnight then?
- c. Is it true that Mr. Y was a difficult employer?
- d. Were most of these barns built during the 1920s?

**Neutral:**

- a. Tell me what it was like on the night of the election.
- b. How did you feel about dancing after midnight?
- c. How did Mr. Y treat his employees?
- d. When were the most of the barns built?

interview. It can be explored from several angles, including the economic, social or political perspective.

*Process*, e.g. "The Meat Packing Industry" or "Fire Fighting."

Discussion will focus on details of how and why things were done as they were. The emphasis will be on description rather than reflection.

*Chronological*, e.g. "The Role of the Women's Institute on the Prairies."

Here the focus is on development, and changes over time. This type of interview can be applied to a person, career, a business or an institution.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, as aspects of all three may well be combined in any one interview. A basic emphasis or focus, however, will give your interview structure and coherence.

### Framing questions

The form and content of questions will determine which memories an interviewee will select to disclose. How you ask questions is crucial to the success of your interview. Everyone has cultural biases, depending on their background and experiences. Try to be aware of your own cultural perspective and how it is reflected in the questions that you ask. It is also useful to examine your own assumptions about the past. Finally, remember the questions should be conversational, rather than confrontational, in tone.

There are two types of questions: closed and open-ended. Closed questions only allow for single word or limited response, and open-ended questions invite the possibility of a wide spectrum of response. Here are some tips on how to frame questions for your interview.

1. Closed questions will result in too many yes/no or short answers. On the other hand, open-ended questions can result in an interview without purpose or direction.

A mix of question types, but with a large percentage of open-ended questions, will generally work best. This will avoid responses being either too narrow or too general.

2. Try to phrase questions to elicit a descriptive, narrative, or reflective response.

a. "Describe how the freight was unloaded."

b. "What did Mrs. X do then?"

c. "Why do you think that happened?"

3. Sometimes it is a good idea to start out with an open-ended question on a given topic to give the interviewee a chance to decide what to talk about. Then you can ask more specific or closed questions to elicit further information. "Describe the hospital for me." Then pick up on something that was mentioned. "How many wards were there?" Then search out something that was not mentioned that you want to know. "Who was the doctor at that time?"

4. It is important to be as objective as possible in your questioning and not to suggest a required or preferred response in the wording of your question.

*How, what, when, and who* questions are all objective. *Why* questions are more difficult to frame without suggesting an answer.

5. Make your questions neutral rather than leading, and avoid negative or challenging questions that may force an interviewee into a defensive position.

Word choice is important. Some words carry negative connotations whereas others have positive ones. For example, the words *corrupt*, *discrimination*, *destroyed*, are negative. *Democratic*, *natural*, *inspired*, on the other hand, carry a positive connotation. Be aware of how you use such words to avoid leading questions. This is particularly important when dealing with sensitive issues.

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## Interviewing

Once you have planned your project, purchased your equipment, done your research, drawn up a question set, and thought about how you are going to phrase your questions, you need to think about both the actual interview and process of interviewing itself. It is much harder to do a good job of interviewing than it sounds. You will need to practice before you go out for the first time. Try interviewing your colleagues on the project to get a feel for the process. This section will take you through the stages of an interview and offer some guidelines on technique.

### Arranging the Interview

Contact the person you are going to interview to arrange a specific day and time. Make sure you have the correct address. You may want to get detailed directions in rural areas. It is often a good idea to confirm the arrangement on the day of the interview in case the arrangement has been forgotten, or the person is unwell or does not feel up to it that particular day. Before you leave home, make sure you have everything. It is always useful to go through a check list of the equipment you need.

### Getting Set Up

The most important thing on arrival is to choose the best place to do the interview. You need to consider the level of ambient or background noise. We rarely notice the hum of fluorescent lights and refrigerators, but the tape recorder has an unfailing ear for all sounds. This is especially the case if you are using automatic level control on your recorder. A living room is usually best, as carpet absorbs ambient sound. Close the door to avoid unwanted sounds. Avoid the use of creaking chairs, and do not face the microphone towards a ticking clock. If possible keep the window closed to avoid the sudden roar of lawn mowers or wail of ambulances. Remember too that air conditioning and fans will also interfere with the quality of your sound.

It is always best to discourage the presence of third parties during an oral history interview, even pets. The flow of an interview depends on a one-to-one relationship to establish close rapport and absorption in the telling. Spouses may interrupt or disagree, and this will spoil the flow of your interview. Moreover, it is difficult afterwards to know who is speaking, particularly if there are two or more same sex voices. If you do have to allow another person to be present, always identify them at the beginning of the tape.

It is important to put the interviewee at ease while you are setting up with a minimum of fuss; remember it is his/her house. Make sure they are seated comfortably in their favourite chair.

Position the tape recorder as unobtrusively as possible, perhaps on the floor beside you out of the interviewee's sight. Make sure, however, that you can see it easily and operate controls from where you are sitting. Make sure the microphone is positioned at whatever distance will produce the best sound quality. If there is no convenient table, place it on a chair between you and the interviewee. If you are using Lavalier microphones, make sure both you and the interviewee are comfortable with their positions.

Position yourself so that light falls on your face as well as the interviewee's. This is helpful for people who may be hard of hearing. In such cases, always look at the interviewee when you speak to him/her, and speak clearly and slowly, raising your voice slightly rather than shouting. Always do a test of both interviewee's and interviewer's voices before beginning the interview. You can use the old standby "Testing, testing, one two three," but whatever you say, be sure to play it back in order to set the recording levels correctly.

### Beginning the Interview

You may want to do a test recording while you are still chatting, "Let's see if this machine is working...." Play it back, to ensure the recorder is working, and that volume and tone are set

#### Check list of equipment

- tape recorder
- microphone
- extension cord
- batteries
- 2 tapes (at least)
- camera and film (for portrait photo of the interviewee)
- release form
- pen and pad
- tape labels
- interview information/summary form
- question set

*Be on time!*

*Give yourself plenty of travel time.*

*You may feel like putting the interview off for another day, but once you get there you will be eager to get started.*

*Yes, everyone feels nervous!*

Do a mental check of your equipment before you begin the interview:

- recorder plugged in?
- microphone or microphones plugged into recorder jack properly?
- microphone position correct?
- microphone on?
- all controls in correct position?
- pen and pad handy?
- question set ready?

correctly. If the machine has a counter, set it at zero (0000). If the interviewee is ready, begin the interview with an introduction, "This is Joe Murphy from the Anyplace History Society talking to Maria Capilano at her home in Calgary on Thursday November 19th 1993." You may wish to expand a little on this by indicating the main topic(s) you will be discussing. "Mrs. Capilano is a long time resident in the Italian community and former owner of the Italia bakery on 14th street. Today we are going to discuss her early experiences as an immigrant to Canada, and Italian cultural traditions in Calgary."

The key elements are the names of both interviewer and interviewee, the place and date.

Move naturally into the flow of questions. Ask general questions first to break the ice and establish the biographical identity of interviewee, such as birth place and date, names of parents.

As both of you get warmed up, you can get into the main questions of the interview.



Let the interviewee tell stories—that's what you are there for.  
Photo: David Epp

## Some General Tips to See You Through the Interview

Ask one question at a time.

Do not be in too much of a hurry to ask all the questions, you may not get to some of them. Let the interviewee tell stories - that's what you are there for.

Give the interviewee time to reflect and gather his/her thoughts. Avoid the tendency to jump in and ask another question if you do not get an immediate response.

Try to show interest and indicate understanding with non-verbal signs—a nod, a smile, you can even develop a silent laugh. Do not say "uh-huh," "right," "mmmm," or other conversational responses which will be irritating to listeners of the tape.

When asking the interviewee to describe people, go from a question on appearance to one on character. This will usually prompt the most vivid descriptions.

Use your note pad to jot down reminders, such as things to come back to, or the spelling of names that you may want to check after the interview.

Keep an eye on the counter on your recorder. Try to find a natural break in the flow near the end of 30 minutes, as it is frustrating to run out of tape in the middle of a story.

When you change over to the other side of the tape it can be useful to make a link with the previous side, "you had just mentioned the day that you .... Can we start from there?"

Remember a tape has only two sides. When you come to the end of the second side you will need another tape. Do an introduction for the second tape. "This is a continuation of Andre Chan interviewing Pedro Smith on January 6th 1992." Slide back into the topic, "You were telling me about...."

Listen carefully for clues and further references, asides and ideas that you can make

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a note of to ask questions about later. Note particular uses of words or terms that you need to have explained. Tone of voice can be a clue as to feelings/attitudes on something that you may or may not wish to pursue.

Aim to keep the more sensitive issues towards the end of the interview.

Finally, make it clear to the interviewee when the interview is about to end, e.g. "Before we finish, is there anything you would like to add to that?"

It is not advisable to go any longer than 1 1/2 hours.

You can always arrange a second interview if it seems that it would be productive. Establish some of the topics that you would like to discuss at this second interview before you leave.

### **Tips for Keeping the Interview on Track**

#### **Changing the Subject:**

Sometimes an interviewee will enthusiastically rattle on about something outside your subject area. You need to be able to bring them back to the original topic or change the subject, politely but firmly. Try such phrases as:

*"Getting back to X,..."*

*"A moment ago you mentioned X,..."*

*"Could we move on to talk about X?"*

#### **Returning to or Pursuing a Subject Further:**

Sometimes an interviewee will mention something in passing that you think is important to talk about, but you do not want to interrupt him/her. Make a note of it and bring up the topic again later in the interview: "Can we go back to the first job you had, who were the people you worked with?"

It is often necessary to probe a little to get the information you need: "I would like to talk a little about how you made X, could you lead me through the steps involved?"

#### **Clarification:**

Oral history interviews can sometimes lose direction and with it, the sense of chronology. For the benefit of future listeners it is useful to clarify what has been said.

*"Was that during the 1930s or later?"*

*"Was that during the Second World War?"*

*"Was James MacDonald, who you mentioned earlier as the proprietor of the hotel, your uncle?"*

*"Could you describe the pit?"*

*"You mentioned the term X, could you explain that?"*

#### **Clarification of Visual Clues:**

An interviewee may make a gesture to indicate something visually, "Oh, it was about so high." The interviewer can see the gesture but later listeners to the tape later will not be able to. Clarify verbally what has been indicated, for example, "Was that about six feet?"

#### **Photographs**

Photographs can be a useful way to stimulate long term memory. If you have historical photographs that are linked to the experience of your interviewee, bring them along. If you discover that the interviewee has any photographs that document the subject of the interview always ask to see them. Clarify any references the interviewee makes to people, buildings, events, in a photograph. Make a note about any photographs discussed for the interview file.

*"Don Z is the man sitting on the ground, third from the left, in the photograph of the pit dated 1932?"*

*"That's the building with the awning on the north side of the street?"*



Always clarify any references made to a photograph, while the tape is running: *"This is your sister Jane, second from the left, on her graduation from the University of Alberta in 1924?"*

Photo: Robert van Schaik

### Other Materials

Interviewees may also produce other items pertaining to your project, they can also be useful in stimulating memories. Always ask about them. "Why do you have a programme from the Edmonton Exhibition of 1925?"

Such items may be useful to copy or possibly to use in an exhibition.

### Loans

You may want to consider making a photocopy or print copy of a photograph belonging to an interviewee. If you wish to borrow an item from an interviewee it is a good idea to do so formally to avoid any problems or misunderstandings later on.

A loan form will indicate that the interviewee has loaned you a photograph or any other materials, and that they will be returned. When they have been returned you need to get the borrower to sign again agreeing they have been returned safely.

### Signing the Release Form

Before you leave make sure both you and the interviewee sign the release form.

### Before You Leave

You may be asked to have tea or coffee. Try to stay a short while and show appreciation for the time your interviewee has spent with you.

### Finally...

Take care of your tape, it is an irreplaceable historical document.

Push out the safety tabs on the bottom of the cassette with the nib of a ballpoint or pencil to prevent any accidental recording over your interview.

### Follow Up Work

Once the interviewing has been carried out, the field work of the project is over, but there is still much to be done to complete the process.

### Documenting the Interview

The first step is to mark or label the tape. There are several vital things you need to include.

First, assign an accession number to the interview, indicating its rank in the interview series and the number of the tape pertaining to that interview. This can be as simple as "#1:1." If your project is going on over a number of years you may want to include the year, e.g. "93 #1:1." If you plan on having a series of interviews on different topics you may want to give a name to the project. For example, "Mines 6:2" would indicate tape 2 of interview number 6 in the series called Mines.

The accession number should be on all tapes and paper work that pertain to that particular interview.

Second, indicate the name of the interviewee as well as the interviewer. Third, give the date and place of the interview. Fourth, indicate whether the tape is the original recording or a copy. You may use stickers of your own

making to indicate this, or the “master” and “copy” stickers which are included with some brands of tape.

This same information should also be hand written or typed on the card inside the tape box.

### Copying

It is worth considering making a copy tape. Something could happen to the original tape, and you would be left with nothing to show for your efforts. Ideally a copy tape, “the working copy,” should be used for listening to the interview, preparing summaries, and later use by researchers.



### Anyplace Oral History Project LOAN FORM

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby entrust the item(s) listed below to the temporary care of ANYPLACE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT / NAME OF INSTITUTION, to make copies of/exhibit the said item(s), for use in accordance with the policies of ANYPLACE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT / NAME OF INSTITUTION. I understand that the item(s) will be returned by the specified date.

ITEM(S): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

DATE BY WHICH TO BE RETURNED:

OWNER

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Returned: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

BORROWER

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If your interviewee produces items pertaining to your project, ask about them. Photo: Robert van Schaik

A completed interviewee file should include the following documentation:

- copy of interviewee biographical data sheet
- copy of interviewer biographical data sheet
- release form
- photographs if relevant
- summary sheets
- subject heading sheet if relevant
- any correspondence pertaining to the interview

Loan Form

It is easy to copy tapes with a double tape machine or two machines and a cable that allows you to record from one to the other. Remember that you will lose sound quality when you copy, particularly if you record from one tape to another on the same machine.

Copying is also time consuming. An ideal solution is to have the tapes professionally copied. This service can be done speedily for a minimal cost, is highly efficient, and ensures quality sound that matches that of your original interview.

### Transcripts

Do you need transcripts? What are you planning to do with them? It is easier and quicker to read a transcript of an interview than listen to a tape. On the other hand, the transcript loses the nuances of the discussion, speech patterns, and the personality of the interviewee. You may therefore want to assess how often your collection may be used by researchers, before spending the money to do transcripts.

### *How long does it take to do transcripts?*

The production of transcripts is a major undertaking. One hour of interview time can take up to 15 hours of transcribing time. A summary will probably take less than two hours for every hour of interview time.

### *What extra costs will be incurred?*

Unless you have the right person in your group, you may have to hire someone skilled at both editing and using the proper equipment to produce good transcripts. This is costly and time consuming but is rarely necessary unless you are planning a publication or undertaking the project as a public archive.

### Summaries

Regardless of the decision to do transcripts or not, some description of the content of the tape is necessary for it to be of use to others. Generally a summary (or synopsis) is best done by the person who did the interview, as soon as possible after the interview.

## Anyplace Oral History Project SUMMARY SHEET

- |                       |                |             |              |
|-----------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1. Accession number:  | 93#2 : 1       | Date:       | Aug. 1, 1993 |
| 2. Interviewee:       | Maria Capilano |             |              |
| 3. Interviewer:       | Joe Murphy     |             |              |
| 4. Place:             | Calgary        |             |              |
| 5. Number of tapes:   | 1              | Total Time: | 83 minutes   |
| 6. Restrictions:      | none           |             |              |
| 7. Counter or minutes |                |             |              |

### SUMMARY

- 001 Introduction
- 005 Early childhood in Palermo, Sicily
- 015 Father's occupation
- 020 Immigration to Canada 1930
- 030 Calgary during the Depression
- 040 Italian neighbourhood in Calgary
- 050 Excursion to Banff - 1940
- 055 Takes over Father's bakery
- 060 Easter traditions
- 069 Marriage to Enzo - wedding preparations

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The summary charts the progression of the interview, breaking the subjects covered down in to manageable segments of time. The digital counters on tape recorders are not all the same, and can be confusing to use. For this reason some practitioners recommend using 5 to 10 minute segments. Watch the clock while you are listening to the tape and write down the main topics of discussion during each segment. In this way you will know roughly where on the tape each topic is located.

The interview information—names, date, number of tapes, total length of interview—can be combined with the summary as shown here in the example.

### **Cataloguing**

The process of cataloguing can be very simple or very complicated. The depth and detail will depend on your project size and the type of institution and researchers you are serving. Whatever you do, be systematic.

A simple card entry by name of the interviewee is the most basic type of cataloguing. It should include other details such as name of the interviewer, date and place of interview, length of interview, and number of tapes, and possibly some of the topics covered.

You may want to consider doing a cross referenced card index system using a number of key words to indicate the topics, theme, people, and places that are central to your project. The Provincial Archives of Alberta Subject Heading (PAASH) system is a useful format to follow to establish standard key words. This system is used by many archives in Alberta.

Computer entry of this data allows for easy access to detailed information or for analysis of the information in your interviews. Again time and cost should be weighed against potential use and practical value of this type of system before you spend the time and money.

If you have a small collection of interviews, a photocopied set of the summaries or synopses placed in a binder will serve as an inventory of

your collection, avoiding the need for a card index.

### **Care, Storage and Handling of Tapes**

1. Never use food or cigarettes near tapes.
2. The tapes should be stored vertically in their boxes in the order of accession, i.e. in the order the interviews were taped. If you have master copies on reel tapes, they should be stored flat to avoid sagging.
3. Always store on wooden rather than metal shelving, and avoid cabinets with magnetic catches, or mobile “compact storage” units. Their motors will set up magnetic fields, which can damage the tapes.
4. Tapes should be stored in “people conditions,” about 17-23 degrees Celsius, avoiding extremes of heat and cold. As a rule, the higher the temperature, the faster the deterioration. Tapes can be stored at lower temperatures, but they must be allowed to warm up slowly before being played. It is most important to avoid “cycling” of temperature and humidity, which weakens the base of the tape and the binder.
5. Tapes should be rewound once a year to avoid “print through.”
6. In general, tapes should be wound smoothly and evenly from head to tail without pausing. Playing a tape with repeated stopping and starting and changes of speed can cause ridges and an uneven wind.
7. Dust is very damaging to tapes. It is best to store your tapes in boxes or cover them with plastic or cloth sheeting.

### **Care of Equipment**

Maintaining your tape recorder in good condition will help preserve your tapes. It should never be allowed to accumulate dust. If you have a protective case, store the recorder in it at all times.

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If the machine gets regular use, clean the heads after about every ten hours of recording with a cotton swab dipped in isopropyl (rubbing) alcohol, available in any drug store. This will do a better job than a head cleaning cassette.

The recorder should also be demagnetized about once a month if in constant use. Ask your dealer about this.

### **Files**

Keep files on your interviewees and put everything into them that pertains to the interview.

### **Thank You Letters**

It is an important courtesy to thank the interviewee, on behalf of your society or institution as well as yourself the interviewer, for the time and contribution he/she has made to your project.

### **Evaluation**

This is the final stage of the follow up process, but it should also be an integral part of the project. Each interviewer should evaluate his/her own interview and assess its strengths and weaknesses, in order to improve the next one. Here are some questions you might ask. Are you getting the information that you thought you would? Is it significant? Is the sound quality good enough for your purposes? Is there good rapport between interviewers and interviewees? Is there a good balance of empathy and analytical judgement being shown by interviewer? Does the interviewer follow up on significant points, pursue lines of enquiry? Are you sticking to your procedural guidelines? Can you meet your schedule? Are you getting the information that you want?

### **Conclusion**

All oral history projects are demanding and time consuming undertakings. They require careful research and planning, sensible allocation of resources and skills, as well as competent coordination and time management. It is vital to research your topic as extensively as possible beforehand. First, to gauge whether oral interviews are indeed the best way to get the information you need; and second, once you have decided to go ahead, to give you a basis of information from which to ask knowledgeable and pertinent questions. Make sure your interviewers understand the nature of oral history, and have some training or practice in interviewing techniques. Evaluate your progress. You may want to consider an assessment of a small number of interviews as a pilot phase, and make any necessary adjustments, before continuing with your project. Make sure you keep proper records of the interviews, and store the tapes properly. Oral history projects are important—give yours due attention and dedication, and it will be a useful and satisfying contribution to our heritage.

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## Keys to Further Information

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### Oral History in General

Dunaway, David K. and Willa K. Baum. Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1985.

*A comprehensive collection of essays that covers all aspects of oral history.*

Gordon, Michael A. "Review Essay. Seeing and Fleeing Ourselves: Local Oral Histories of Communities." Oral History Review 17, No.1 (Spring, 1989): 117-128.

*A review essay that tackles many of the issues pertaining to local history, its values and limitations - including too much anecdotal nostalgia, avoidance of complexity, homogenizing of time, ignoring of conflict etc.*

Gluck, Sherna Berger ed. and Daphne Patai. Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History. New York: Routledge, 1991.

*A series of essays dealing with the collection and interpretation of women's stories in the context of oral history, community and change.*

Thompson, Paul. The Voice of the Past: Oral History. 2nd edition. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

*A series of essays considered to be the classic introduction to the subject and methods of oral history.*

Marchiafavia, Louis J. "Discovering Your Past with Oral History." Texas Libraries No. 4 (Winter, 1986-87): 95-100.

*Specifically designed for the oral historian of the family, but discussion and principles also apply to the community oral historian.*

### Bibliographies, Guides, Manuals, Methodologies

Association of British Columbia Archivists. A Manual for Small Archives. Vancouver: Association of British Columbia Archivists, 1988.

*Contains a section on sound recordings, see for accessioning, cataloguing.*

Baum, Willa. Oral History for the Local Historical Society. 3rd revised edition. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987.

*Latest updated version of the now famous basic guide to methods from a pioneer practitioner in the field. See Baum's 19 tips for interviewers.*

\_\_\_\_\_. Transcribing and Editing Oral History. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 3rd printing 1985.

*One approach to the process of transcribing and editing.*

Buckendorf, Madeline "Idaho Oral History Centre: New Resources for Libraries." Idaho Librarian 34 (April, 1982): 54-58.

Davis, Cullom, Kathryn Back and Kay MacLean. Oral History From Tape to Type. American Library Association, 1977.

*A how-to which has an introduction and section on interviewing.*

Donegan, Rosemary. "Spadina Avenue: Oral and Visual Images." Canadian Oral History Association Journal 8 (1985): 41-44.

*Draws attention to the role photographs can play in jogging memory during interviews.*

Douglas, Enid. "Oral history." History News 28 (November, 1973).

*A brief discussion of the basic factors to be considered when conducting interviews with elderly people.*

Drexel Library Quarterly 15 (October, 1979).

*The entire issue is devoted to "managing oral history collections in the library."*



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Ericson, Stacey, compiler. A Field Notebook for Oral History. Boise: Idaho State Historical Society, 1980.

*A guide to setting up an oral history project. Part 1 is written for the interviewer and deals with a range of topics including research; interviewing techniques - listening skills, problems and solutions; framing questions, objectivity; and finally provides a checklist for equipment use. Available from the Idaho State Historical Society for a very modest sum.*

Fry, Amelia R. "The Nine Commandments of Oral History." The Journal of Library History 3 (1968): 63-73.

*A witty "interview" that brings out many of the pitfalls of interviewing.*

Halvice, Patricia, Pate. Oral History: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography. Jefferson, NC.: MacFarland, 1985.

*The most comprehensive up to date bibliography.*

Ives, Edward. The Tape Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, revised edition, 1980.

*A useful and detailed book.*

Jackson, Bruce. Fieldwork. Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1987.

*Chapter 7 on interviewing is useful for oral historians as well as folklorists.*

Lance, David. An Archive Approach to Oral history. London: Imperial War Museum, in association with the International Association of Sound Archives, 1978.

*A useful example of a very focused study.*

Loomis, Trevor. Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence. London: Hutchinson, 1987.

*A sophisticated monograph on oral history. Part 1 deals with the definition and value of oral history; Part 2 with the interview; Part 3 with assessing interviews; and Part 4 deals with theoretical aspects.*

McCracken, Jane. Oral History - Basic Techniques. Winnipeg: Manitoba Museum of Man, 1974.

*A quick introduction or overview.*

Reimer, Derek, ed. Voices. A Guide to Oral History. Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Reprint, 1988.

*The most useful all-round guide for an oral history project.*

Kyvig, David E. and Myron A. Marty. Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You. Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1982.

*Chapter 6 on oral documents contains interviewing guidelines, and chapter 7 on visual documents contains a useful section on careful reading of historical photographs, which is useful for oral history interviews.*

## **Periodicals**

For those who wish to pursue oral history issues in some depth, there is a wealth of information in articles in four main periodicals. Oral History

Oral History Review

Canadian Oral History Association Journal

International Journal of Oral History

The Journal of American History, since 1987 has carried a number of academic articles on oral history in each September issue.

## **Oral History Project Publications**

The Sound Heritage Series from the Provincial Archives of British Columbia provides a range of examples of published oral history projects. Copies available from BC Crown Publications. One of these titles is:

Marlatt, Daphne and Carole Itter. Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End. Sound Heritage Series, No. 24-25. Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1979.

*An illustrated collection of oral interviews that is a good example of the potential of an urban history project.*

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Buckendorf, Madeleine. "Life and Death of a Small Town: The Case of Montour, Idaho." Idaho Yesterdays (Summer, 1989): 8-24.

Schrager, Samuel. "Migratory Lumberjack: A Portrait of Michigan Bill Stowell." Forest & Conservation History 35, No.1 (January, 1991): 4-15.

*A good example of the type of historical information and perspective that can come from oral interviews. Also a good example of an unidealized view of the past*

### Videos

"The Oral Historian." A 37 min. audio-video tape on oral history by Edward Ives. Available from North East Historic Film, Blue Hill Falls, Maine, USA, 04615. Tel. (207) 374-2736.

*A useful audio-visual guide to undertaking an oral history project.*

### Inventories

Voices of Alberta: A Survey of Oral History Completed in Alberta Up to 1980. Alberta Culture, Historical Resources Division, 1981.

Voix Albertains supplement français à Voices of Alberta: A survey of Oral History Completed in Alberta up to 1980. Alberta Culture, Historical Resources Division, 1983.

National Inventory of Oral History Holdings. (Forthcoming)  
Canadian Oral History Association  
P.O. Box 2064  
Station D  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1P 5W3  
Tel. (613) 996-6996



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Oral history projects are challenging and hard work, but they can be fun and the results well worth the effort.

Photo: David Epp.



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